

Kids call "Minecraft" a fun game; teachers call it a great way to learn

By Chicago Tribune, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.08.14

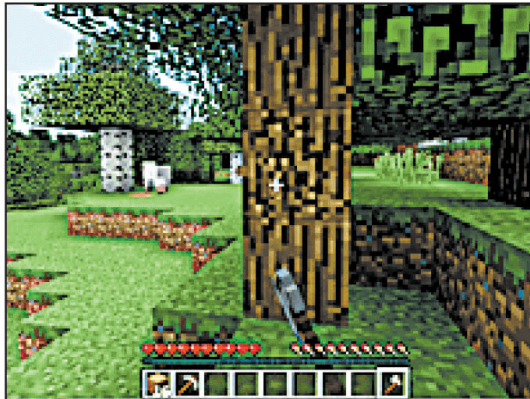
Word Count **604**



Bobby Craig (left) and Doogy Lee create worlds in "Minecraft" that parallel what they have been reading in "The Hobbit" as part of their fifth-grade class studies at Quest Academy in Palatine, Ill. Photo: **Chuck Berman/Chicago Tribune/MCT**

‘Minecraft’ as a learning tool

More and more educators are using “Minecraft” — capitalizing on the popularity and flexibility of the building-block game.



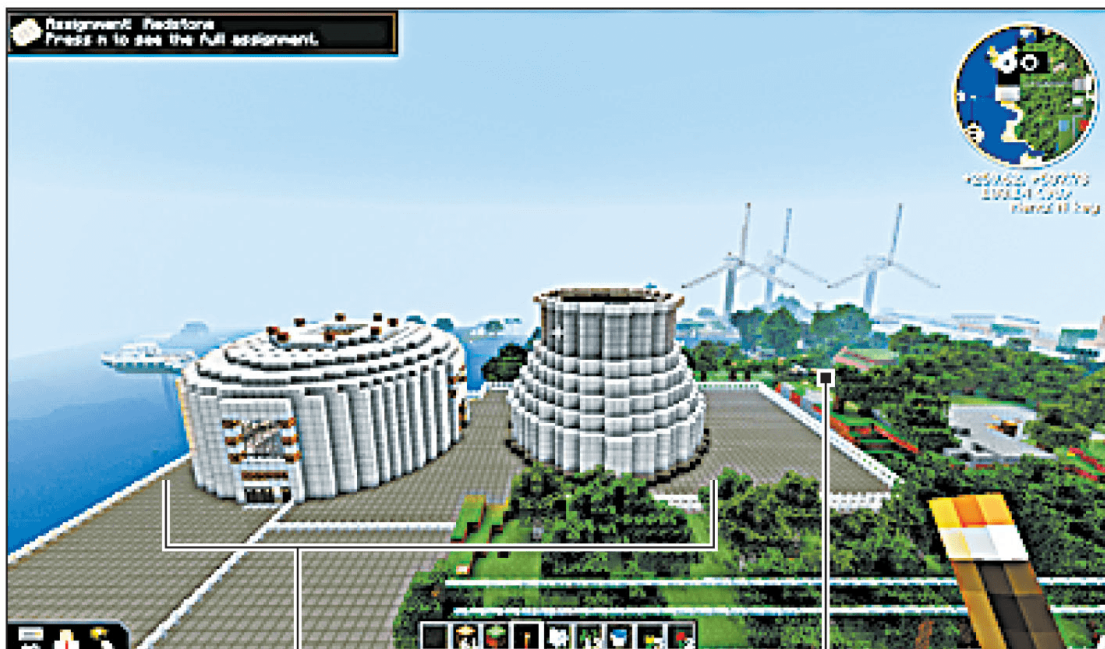
What is ‘Minecraft’?

- **The game** Players explore a digital landscape and build with digital blocks, “mined” from all sorts of materials; players build structures and worlds, interacting with animals, creatures and other players
- **Platform** Available on computers and mobile devices

- **Popularity** More than 100 million users worldwide and more than 14 million copies of the computer version sold; it has ranked among the most popular games on iTunes and Android
- **History** Created in 2009 by Swedish developers

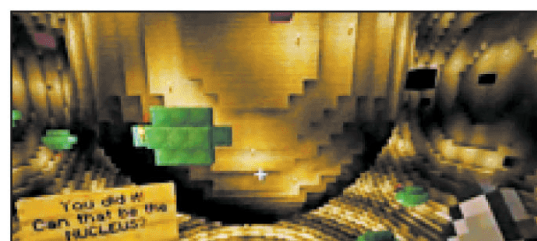
How it’s used by students

Interactive environments Using a custom version called “MinecraftEdu”, University of Illinois students created simulated power plants for middle school students tasked with building a town and connecting it to the grid



Like their real-world counterparts, the power plants in this “Minecraft” world all function differently; this virtual nuclear plant requires students to refine uranium ore to fuel it

These windmills produce varying amounts of power depending on wind speed; there are also solar panels (not pictured) that provide power only during the day



CHICAGO — On a school library computer, Arie Estrin puts together a nuclear submarine. He builds it block by digital block.

Arie didn't search the Internet for submarines. Instead the seventh-grader is building one himself with one of the world's hottest video games: "Minecraft."

Arie, 12, lives in Northbrook. It is a suburb of Chicago. He called the game a great tool for showing what he knows. He said it's a good way to understand how something actually looked or happened.

"Minecraft" may seem like it should be played at home, not in the classroom. Still, more and more teachers are using it to teach everything from history to science.

Legos On The Computer

The idea is to get kids excited about school through technology. Nothing has gotten kids as excited as "Minecraft." More than 100 million people play it around the world.

Zach Gilbert is a sixth-grade teacher in Normal, Ill. He is also an expert on gaming in education. Sometimes, parents ask him about using video games in class. He asks them if they played Legos as a kid.

"Minecraft" is like Legos, he tells them, but it's played on the computer. "And there's more building and creating than you could ever do (in the real world)," he said.

"Minecraft" was invented by Markus Persson, a game designer from Sweden. "Minecraft" lets users build almost anything they can imagine out of multicolored cubes. It was released in 2009.

The results can be amazing. YouTube is filled with videos of highly detailed "Minecraft" worlds. They include New York City buildings and fantasy lands.

Ben Rothman is a student at Northwestern University. He crafted the university's buildings with "Minecraft."

Rothman said he had been spending 20 hours a week playing video games. "I figured, 'I'm going to do this anyway. Why don't I do something that will let me play but also get something out of it?'" he said.

Kids Are Engaged

That is why Minecraft is used at hundreds of schools around the world.

"The secret sauce is that kids are engaged," said Joel Levin. His company, TeacherGaming, has sold the "MinecraftEdu" to 2,500 schools worldwide. "They love it. They want to do it."

Some kids want to do it so much that they sign up for weekend or summer classes that use "Minecraft." Dana Stewart teaches at Northwestern University. She has her students build ancient Egyptian buildings with "Minecraft." The project makes them think about design problems and building materials. The students feel like they're walking through the buildings in real life.

The idea is to use a game that kids love to introduce them to science and engineering, said Jana Sebestik. She is with the University of Illinois.

Fifth-graders at Quest Academy in Illinois use the game as part of their unit on J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Hobbit." Since November, students have been building their own worlds — complete with dragons. They also write about their adventures.

"They Can Build Anything"

"'Minecraft' is a nice way to make your imagination fly a little bit better," said Amelia Landau, 11.

Maria Cipollone, who is with Temple University, has studied "Minecraft."

She found that it taught students some math skills. However, it didn't help their math test scores.

Dan Rezac, who is with the Northbrook school, said "Minecraft" can be amazing.

"With 'Minecraft,' they can build anything," he said. They can learn social skills so they can work together with other people. They can build worlds and lands and objects. They can even re-create the human body so they can test diseases on it.

There's no limit to what kids can do with "Minecraft," he said.

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following BEST shows that "Minecraft" is used as a learning tool?
 - (A) "Minecraft" is like Legos, he tells them, but it's played on the computer.
 - (B) "Minecraft" lets users build almost anything they can imagine out of multicolored cubes.
 - (C) But more and more teachers are using it to teach everything from history to science.
 - (D) Maria Cipollone, who is with Temple University, has studied "Minecraft."

- 2 "Minecraft" most directly helps develop which of the following skills in children?
 - (A) drawing
 - (B) language
 - (C) math
 - (D) reading

- 3 Which piece of information is common to both the article and the graphic?
 - (A) The game is used by more than 100 million players worldwide.
 - (B) The game was created by Markus Persson in 2009.
 - (C) "MinecraftEdu" is being used in 2,500 schools worldwide.
 - (D) The Digital Historian Project is recreating Beijing.

- 4 Using information supplied in the graphic, who created "Minecraft"?
 - (A) Dan Bloom
 - (B) developers from Sweden
 - (C) the Digital Historian Project
 - (D) University of Illinois researchers

Answer Key

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